

Hungary to start using Russian virus vaccine in EU first

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Hungary will on Friday become the first EU nation to start using Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus, the country's chief medical officer said.

"Today we are beginning to vaccinate with the Sputnik V vaccine, this is

taking place in the designated vaccination stations," Cecilia Muller told a daily press briefing.

Family doctors in Budapest could choose five persons each to send for the jab at four hospitals in the capital, Muller said, as part of an initial round of inoculations using the first batch of 2,800 doses sent from Russia.

Hungary broke ranks with the EU last month by becoming the first bloc member to approve Sputnik V, ordering two million doses to be delivered over three months, enough to vaccinate one million people.

Russia registered Sputnik V—named after the Soviet-era satellite—in August, months ahead of Western competitors but before the start of large-scale clinical trials, which left some experts wary.

However, the vaccine is 91.6 percent effective against COVID-19, according to results published in *The Lancet* journal on Tuesday that the experts said allayed transparency concerns over the jab.

Budapest has often clashed with Brussels, especially on migration, and has repeatedly criticised what it says is the slow pace of vaccine approval and procurement by EU authorities.

"Each day we spend waiting around for Brussels, we would lose one hundred Hungarian lives," said Prime Minister Viktor Orban on state radio Friday.

Last month Hungary also approved the Chinese-made Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine—again the first in the EU to do so—and said it had ordered five million doses.

"If Hungary begins using the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine in the near

future, more than 2.5 million people can be inoculated by Easter" or around one in four Hungarians, said Orban.

"By the end of May, compared to another country of similar size, Hungary would be able to administer the jab to 3.5 million more citizens," he said.

Responding to critics who say Hungary should use only use jabs approved by the EU's EMA regulator, Orban said Hungarian experts are "world-class".

"Why would we think that (the EMA) are better than us?" he said.

On Friday, Hungary reported 99 new deaths from COVID-19, bringing the country's overall death toll to 13,543, while the number of infections and coronavirus patients in hospitals has begun rising sharply in February.

Hungarians are among the least willing to get the shots in the EU, but the rate has been rising in recent months.

In surveys the most popular choices of vaccines were the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca vaccines, with the Russian and Chinese jabs least popular.

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